

Sunset High School helps turn young lives around

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On a recent drizzly December morning, a Sunset High School student came running into the school's office. Out of breath, he apologized for being late, saying he knew a fifth-grade field trip was scheduled for that day and he didn't want to let the staff down by not showing up.

That's the kind of relationship the staff and students at Sunset have created, according to principal Tony Fabricius, who said it's what contributes to the school's success.

"He just comes here and he feels a sense of purpose and that we depend on him," Fabricius said. "And then he feels he depends on us."

Along redwood-lined Elk Valley Cross Road lies Sunset High School, the only "continuation" high school in the Del Norte County Unified School District.

At times, the school copes with a negative reputation, said Fabricius. But with the faculty's creative approach to learning, he argues that Sunset is more than it may appear.

The high school offers a variety of innovative programs designed to ensure that students who are at risk of failing to graduate receive a meaningful and effective education.

"A lot of what we do is create opportunities for students to demonstrate their excellence or greatness or achievements in other ways that don't include testing, exams, scoring," Fabricius said. "We have to create relevance in different ways for them."

Continuation schools are alternative high school experiences for students 16 years and older who face the possibility of not graduating.

The schools are designed in part to help students accrue credits quickly. Districts with more than 100 12-graders are required by California law to have such schools, according to EdSource. "We are built for students to recover their credits quickly in order to graduate on time.

"So, that means we have to be very creative in what we do and how we do it. And we also have to recapture these students in a way that they feel relevant and important, or they feel like education and coming to school is relevant and important," Fabricius said.

The faculty and administration's efforts have resulted in an attendance rate of 96.4%, a notable improvement from 87% over the past five years. By comparison, the attendance rate for one of the year's model continuation schools in California is 85%-90%, according to the state Department of Education.

For the seven years Fabricius has been Sunset's principal, he and the faculty have worked to establish its reputation as a school where students can feel seen, valuable and confident in non-traditional ways.

"That's been the challenge," said Fabricius. "A lot of what we do is helping to reverse that perception in the community of Sunset High School. Our students just show achievement in different ways."

Many of the students enroll after struggling in a standard high school. At Sunset, they find different ways to learn. "Many of them, for one reason or another, became ghosts at other school sites, meaning they fell between the cracks for whatever reason," Fabricius said.

“These are students who come here and we work them into what we do, and before you know it, they are students who are presenting, researching, writing scripts, creating activities, and facilitating and public speaking.”

Sunset’s programs, such as Friday field trips, onsite farming and the poetry team, help the students learn through reciprocal teaching and hands-on projects. One member of their poetry team was the county’s poetry champion, who made it to the state competition in Sacramento.

The Friday field trips, recently completed for the fall term, include a focus on providing an entertaining and educational day for every third- and fifth-grader in Del Norte County. The third-graders visit Sunset in the spring and the fifth-graders visit in the fall.

“My favorite thing is trying to teach the (younger) kids and making sure that they have fun,” said 11th-grader Mikaila Marlin. “It’s actually given me a lot. It’s given me confidence to talk in front of people, because I definitely get nervous. I’ve definitely learned a lot here.”

Sunset students use the field trips to help the fifth- and third-graders with woodworking projects, animal education, a redwood interpretive trail, mathematics and apple pressing. Leading the various projects gives the high school students practice in public speaking and leadership.

“It’s an incredible program,” said teacher Kelly Troyna. “They can feel the difference in their own skills.”

Each high school student plays a valuable role during the field trips, said Fabricius. “For these students, who again have felt either that they’ve given up or they’ve felt given up upon, now they feel relevant and they feel important and they feel accomplished.”

In addition to the field trips, the high school’s teachers provide a trade career education, which is why the school has implemented an agricultural component. Sunset has a small up-and-coming farm and some farm animals, so students can learn hands-on about the agriculture industry.

The students also participate in Sources of Strength, a peer-led group centering on suicide prevention.

Sunset’s approach to learning, with creative activities and student self-reflection, is a labor of love for many of the teachers and staff. Their contributions often stray outside their job descriptions - bringing cookies for a schoolwide holiday party, as an example.

“You get a very huge sense of reward working at Sunset,” said Fabricius. “Again, it’s not easy what we do here. It’s tough, man. It’s a challenge. It’s emotional.

“These kids deserve the effort that we give, and they’re great kids. They sometimes don’t believe in themselves, and it’s up to us to instill in them that they’re worth it.”

